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SUBJECT: NORTH DARFUR'S ARABS: PLAYING THE VICTIM, WANTING A SEAT AT THE TABLE, AND HEDGING THEIR BETS

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[1](#)1. (SBU) SUMMARY: On March 27, Darfur's northern Arab tribal leaders told emboff that they are victims that should be included in any negotiations on Darfur's future. In separate meetings the week of March 23, UN staff, local NGOs, and leaders from other ethnic groups emphasized that many of Darfur's Arabs continue to "hedge their bets," with some traditional leaders and former militiamen (such as Musa Hilal and Mohammed Hamdan) accepting government positions and others keeping the government at an arm's length. END SUMMARY.

#### VICTIMIZATION

[1](#)2. (SBU) On March 27, four Arab leaders of North Darfur told emboff that they, like other ethnic groups, have suffered in the Darfur crisis. Hammad Abdalla Gibriel (from the Ireiqat tribe,) Ahmed Abdalla Judalla (of the Etafat,) Abdalla Safi Al-Nur, and Abdulrahman Mohamed Eisa (of the Mahariya) emphasized that Darfur's Arabs are victims of insecurity, marginalization, and rebel attacks. Gibriel named specific instances, some as recent as last week, where rebels attacked Arabs, stole their livestock, and killed their Arab brethren. Gibriel stated that some actions of the rebels, such as stealing a water drilling rig, show that they do not truly care about the development of the region, but only about themselves.

#### NEGOTIATIONS

[1](#)3. (SBU) Gibriel and the other Arab tribal leaders emphasized that they have been marginalized in the political process by many rebel groups and other ethnic groups. He added that the AU, the UN, and any other body that engages in Darfur should include the Arabs in negotiations. According to these leaders, the large number of Arabs in Darfur make them an integral part of any discussion. According to Gibriel, the Arabs are the majority in Darfur, comprising 62% of the total population of Darfur, and between 30-55% of the population in North Darfur. (COMMENT: These estimates appear very high, as most analysts assert that the Fur comprise the majority of Darfur's population but no one knows for sure. END COMMENT.)

[1](#)4. (SBU) On March 22, Gerard McHugh, an officer for the African Union-United Nations Joint Mediation Support Team in El-Fasher, also told emboffs that the Arab leaders should be given a place at negotiations. "If we [the UN] do not give the Arabs a voice, it is going to come back to haunt us," stated McHugh.

#### RELATIONSHIP WITH GOVERNMENT

[1](#)5. (SBU) In working with the Government of Sudan, Gibriel and the other Arab leaders emphasized that their relationship with the GoS

is similar to other groups, where local and tribal leaders are incorporated into the central government. They acknowledged that the appointment of controversial figures to government positions (such as Musa Hilal, see reftel A) may be perceived as an affront to the international community. Nonetheless, these leaders said that Hilal comes from a leading Arab family, and that tribal leaders have always been incorporated into the government. Gibriel also downplayed Hilal's involvement in Darfur's atrocities, stating that "if you compare his crimes to others, it is nothing." The Arab leaders also dismissed the idea that the government was trying to buy off Musa Hilal's important (but internally divided) Mahamid tribe, saying, "The only one that this affects is Musa."

¶6. (SBU) Discussing another prominent leader Arab militia leader, Mohamed Hamdan (aka Hamati, reftel B), UNAMID's McHugh stated that although Hamati is currently aligned with the government, he could switch loyalties at any time. "Hamati is a tactical thinker, not much of a strategist," said McHugh. McHugh said that one of the UN's local employees and former Sudanese intelligence operative told him that he knows Hamati quite well and that he is never loyal to anyone but himself.

¶7. (SBU) Ahmed Bahr, of the North Darfur Legislative Council and a supporter of SLM-Minnawi, claimed to emboff on March 27 that despite representing "only five percent" of Darfur's population, the Arabs have an incredible influence on the region and the state and national governments. (Note: Although precise statistics are not available, the five percent figure is far too low. The actual figure is probably closer to forty percent in all of Darfur, and as much as fifty percent in South Darfur where there is a large concentration of Baggara Rizeigat. End note.) Bahr stated that the Arabs are more heavily armed than any other group, and that the government must therefore continue to cooperate with them in a very cautious and pragmatic manner.

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¶8. (SBU) After naming a litany of rebel aggressions against their tribes, Arab tribal leader Gibriel stated that the government needs to come in with a stronger hand "to stop this chaos." All the Arab tribal leaders strongly criticized the rebel movements, saying "these so-called movements have more satellite phones than weapons." They added that if the international community only let the GoS act as it wishes, it could put an end to all of Darfur's problems once and for all.

"HEDGING THEIR BETS"

¶9. (SBU) UNAMID's McHugh emphasized to emboff that the Arab tribes continue to "hedge their bets, as they are not sure whether they will align with the government or join a devil's alliance with the rebels." McHugh stated that the most natural ally for the Arabs are the Fur, given their historical and cultural relationship with this group. McHugh stated that many of the Arab tribes have very informal alliances with other rebel groups, some of which are as simple as "we will live in proximity and not attack one another."

¶10. (SBU) McHugh gave numerous examples of how Arab groups are starting to assert themselves politically. He stated that in El-Geneina a committee representing dozens of Arab tribes from the region recently formed. In McHugh's analysis the creation of this group signals that the Arabs of this region feel the pressure to unite and put forth one voice. McHugh also said that the Habaniya leadership in South Darfur, the Arab IDPs in Zalingi, and the North Darfur Arab tribal council have all started to have a growing public presence.

¶11. (SBU) Ahmed Adam Yousif, Manager of the Ajaweed Organization for Peace and Reconciliation in El-Fasher, told emboff on March 19 that most of the Arabs who have turned against the GoS have migrated to JEM or SLM-Nur. Like McHugh, Yousif stated that the Fur have had close interaction with the Arab tribes and these cultural and traditional affiliations may have attracted some disaffected Arabs to the predominantly Fur SLM-Nur. Yousif claimed that all of the Arab Rizeigat tribes hate Musa Hilal except for his own Mahamid tribe. Yousif also asserted that the Arab tribes are not united and

have longstanding rivalries and grievances against one another.

COMMENT

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¶12. (SBU) The Arab leaders' call for a "stronger government hand" in the region is perhaps the most telling indicator of their relationship with the regime. Although North Darfur's Arabs fear being made the ultimate scapegoats for Darfur's recent past and may not be entirely satisfied with their situation, unlike many ethnic groups they see a stronger government military presence in the region as directly benefiting them. Although it is necessary to include some Arab leaders in the peace process, giving them a seat at the negotiating table will be a delicate endeavor. Although not all Arabs were involved in Darfur's atrocities, some were, albeit at the behest of their masters in Khartoum. However, Arab tribal leaders need to be part of an overall solution, and we will continue to urge the JMST and UNAMID to include the Arabs in their planned (though as yet nascent) outreach to civil society groups in Darfur.

FERNANDEZ